MOVED ANY MOUNTAINS LATELY?

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John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

"...if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move." --Matthew 17:20

Scripture
Matthew 17:14-21

Is that true? "If you have faith no bigger than a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there!' and it will move; nothing will prove impossible for you." Is that true in any way that makes sense to us?

On occasion someone has asked me about the little prayer with which I ordinarily begin the reading of the Scripture and the sermon.

"Startle us, O God, with your truth..." The question is usually simply, "Why do you say that? Why do you want to jar us? To be startled is not on my agenda when I come to church. On the contrary, I'm looking for a little serenity, a reminder that someone up there has an eye on me. I don't want to be startled." I hear that question. I hear where it comes from. Sometimes I have to make myself pray that prayer. Sometimes on Sunday morning I know exactly what it means to be looking for something else. Sometimes by the time Sunday morning comes around I have been startled more times than I want to be...by the relentless rush and noise of the traffic and the abruptness of horns blowing, and taxis shoving...by the incredible capacity of human beings for violence, which screams from the front page of the paper...by the street person who out of nowhere confronts me and asks for a handout...by the too-cheerful vendor who has shoved a rose-bud under my nose every night for one solid year. City people don't need any more startling, so why this little prayer?

The answer is that what God has to say to us is startling. And sometimes - either because we have come here for shelter from the stormy blast - not more shocks and surprises, and sometimes because we have heard the familiar words of the Bible so many times we don't really hear them at all any more, and just as the little boy calling wolf too frequently, or the false alarm of fire in a theater are dangerous precisely because repetition has diminished and destroyed their ability to startle, so on Sunday morning, I surmise, we sometimes don't even hear what are significantly startling words from God. So I have gotten into the habit of asking God to help us a bit: to penetrate, to shake us awake, to startle us with the truth we otherwise might not even hear.

"If you have faith no bigger than a mustard seed, you will say to the mountain, 'Move from here to there!' and it will move." Is that true? Is there any sense in which we believe that to be a dependable description of

the way things are? Not really... That's why it's so startling. If you want to move a mountain, a better idea than generating faith, is to secure some earth moving equipment. If concrete results are what we are after, power, authority and technology would seem to be a more promising way of proceeding than piety.

I can remember when the mustard seed was a popular item of jewelry. The seed was encased in a sphere which served as a magnifying glass and I can recall being told about Jesus' mustard seed analogy and concluding that I obviously had missed part of the equation. On the other hand, I did receive a healthy dose of American folk wisdom, appropriated through my father, mostly, to the effect that "you can do anything you want to do if you want it badly enough and try hard enough" and I've always gotten that confused with what Jesus said and of course that's not it at all. Wanting something badly and trying with everything in you to achieve it - will, indeed, help a lot. But there is a major theological heresy lurking in that. Can God be brought in on the side of goals that are ungodly simply because we want them badly...? We can't have everything we want. In fact, there is a sense in which one of the most important developmental tasks for each of us is to come to terms with limitations, that wanting something badly is not always relevant to bringing it to pass and is surely not what Jesus meant - whatever it was.

The little saying about the mustard seed has been called "intentional hyperbole." Someone pointed out that "the Rabbis in Jesus' day used 'mustard seed' as a simile to denote smallness, modesty, insignificance," which is fairly obvious. [The Parables, G. A. Buttrick, p. 20] Someone else uncovered the fact that "the Talmudic writers use 'uprooter of mountains' as a term of praise for a skillful expositor of the law who removed difficulties of interpretation." [The International Critical Commentary, p. 189] Someone else pointed out that in St. Paul's famous soliloquy on love in First Corinthians 13 faith, so as to move mountains, if it is without love, is nothing. And while all that is helpful in understanding this passage as literature, the question of its truth remains. Is it true? In what sense is it true?

The most helpful thing I've read in a long time about the sayings of Jesus was written by Joseph Sittler, Professor of Theology emeritus at the University of Chicago, in an essay on the role of the churches in the complex and difficult task of peace making. Sittler said: "the parables shock the mind into opening to the unenvisioned possible: they madly exaggerate in order to jolt the consciousness of the religiously secure: they are an assault on the obvious. The entire momentum of conventional piety is brought into question." [Gravity and Grace, p. 110]

Well now... "shock the mind - exaggerate in order to jolt - an assault on the obvious." "Startle us, O God," perhaps. Perhaps Jesus' purpose was to shake people loose from their religious conventions...to startle them with a brand new possibility. Furthermore, Sittler wrote, "the parables of the Kingdom are a kind of surgical exploration of those modes and postures of sin that blind, corrupt and pervert humanity's relationship to God." (109)

So perhaps what is at stake here, fundamentally is not actually our

capacity to rearrange the landscape, but our personal relationship with God.

Look again at the story. Jesus and several of His disciples had just come down from a mountain on which they had shared a deeply moving, spiritual experience, in which they came to fuller understanding of who he was. They had shared a vision, complete with appearances by Elijah and Moses... We know that experience as the "Transfiguration." But now they are back down in the valley and they encounter one of my favorite characters in the Bible - this compelling, human, anonymous parent who brings his sick son to Jesus - because he has tried everything else and nothing has worked and his love for his son won't allow him to just let it go, give up. So he's there at the foot of the mountain, and he and his son are who Jesus encounters after that incredible experience on the mountain.

"Have mercy, Lord." he says and falls on his knees, embarrassing everybody in the vicinity...the disciples, the onlookers, his son: can you imagine that boy looking at the ground, kicking a stone as his father then spills out the pathetic story of how the boy has seizures and falls into things and gets burned and half drowns himself and how the disciples who were not up on the mountain having a religious experience had tried to heal the boy and it hadn't worked, and you know from that detail a poignant fact, namely the boy had had a seizure there, while the father was talking with the disciples. And the disciples... Do you remember a situation like that?... Trying to do a simple job that you should have been able to do, and not getting it done, and enduring the embarrassment of having others witness your inability, and then the boss, or foreman, or your parent, or the mechanic, or supervisor suddenly comes and does the task, quickly, efficiently, smoothly. And there you are grinning sheepishly - waste-deep in your own ineptness?

The parable startles at a number of points and just when we want to ask how Jesus cured epilepsy, it changes direction and focuses on faith - first of the disciples. "How did you do that?" they ask for us. "Why couldn't we heal him?" And it is then that Jesus says: "Your faith is too weak - if you have faith no bigger than a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there!' and it will move: nothing will be impossible for you."

In what sense is that true? What does that mean? We can begin to work with it as a metaphor - as intentional hyperbole and observe that the disciples did, indeed, move a mountain or two before they were done... Back within this incident at the foot of the mountain we can surmise that maybe the disciples didn't really try to heal that boy. Maybe their trying was the kind of half-hearted effort that dooms itself to failure because it knows it cannot and will not succeed. Maybe the point of all this is that the disciples were waiting for big faith and didn't realize that it doesn't take big faith to do God's work. That may be a word for us.

We are enthralled by bigness. We Americans, particularly, make a very basic assumption that "more is better." When I have ventured into the kitchen, put pots and pans in place and opened the New York Times Cookbook, I have discovered a deep dark secret about myself that I didn't know. I operate on that principle - more is better. If the recipe says a "clove of

garlic" I assume the product will be improved if I ignore moderation and load it up. One has to be careful about sex stereotypes, but I have been told that men do that sort of thing. Someone quipped recently that American men are constitutionally incapable of saying the following seven words: "That ought to be five percent less."

Reluctantly, we are learning. In biology we are learning that it makes sense to pay attention to smallness. Microbiologist Lewis Thomas has written beautifully about the microcosmic as a source of edification and wisdom. The Lives of a Cell he called his first bestseller about the astonishing things that can be learned by attending to smallness.

E. F. Schumacher wrote Small is Beautiful a decade ago, about the same truth in economics Schumacher and others are convinced that most of the major problems of the world can be attributed to bigness. In fact, he challenges the assumption that big is natural, that it is somehow in the nature of things for little units to get together and make big units and suggests that it is in the nature of things for big units to break into small units and thus increase their efficiency. He called our posture the "idolatry of giantism" and argued that the only possible future for us is within more manageable and understandable - therefore smaller, political and economic structures...which if you have tried to travel from New York City to Chicago on a Friday afternoon recently - is a rather attractive idea.

In things religious, we wait for huge faith, for faith experienced, perceived, felt, totally in our lives. We envy those whose religious experiences are dramatic and big. We wish they were ours. We feel inadequate. Perhaps the word here is startlingly simple: you don't need big faith to do God's work. All you need is a little faith and one thing further - the will to venture, to put it to work.

Perhaps the word is a challenge to take on a few mountains and see what happens...big mountains, immovable mountains. The psychologists are telling us that a sense of individual smallness and insignificance is paralyzing us. We are avoiding major national and cultural problems that are looming ahead of us because they are so huge. Maybe we need the tantalizing suggestion of St. Matthew - that you really don't need much faith to move a mountain.

Mrs. Acquino's recent visit was a reminder that one million Philippinos earlier this year decided that the mountain of dictatorship, corruption and oppression was movable. And so they confronted Marcos' troops, tanks, machine guns with nothing but their faith and flowers and pastries they had baked - and a mountain moved.

A mountain I worry about is morality in common life: morality defined as integrity, honesty, justice, fairness, and freedom. Playwright Arthur Miller was introduced to a convocation of preachers in New York City last week as an artist known for writing moral plays. Miller told us that was not an economic asset at the moment in the theater. But then he intrigued us by observing that there aren't many jobs for which a commitment to high morality is a prerequisite. Honesty, which once was regarded as nearly sacred is simply relativized out of existence. Ellen

Goodman's column Friday in the Tribune identified twenty distortions of the truth which occur everyday and to which we have accommodated ourselves, beginning with Mr. Blank's secretary who says he's in a meeting - and he's not and you know he's not and she knows you know...all the way to dishonesty now raised to national standard operating procedure. The government lies to us, and then lies again by saying they didn't do what they did and then elevates lying to us, to national policy as an acceptable act for our security. And the appalling thing is that with the exception of Bernard Kalb no one is appalled. Now, that, I would suggest is a mountain and its moving will require some faith - faith in a system of government which values integrity so highly it does not lie to its own people even for their own good.

A mountain which looms ahead and over us is the quiet, but rumbling volcano of nuclear weapons. And the most dangerous posture of all is for millions of people in the United States and the Soviet Union who care about a future, to ignore it, to abdicated any responsibility for its moving because it is so huge. To move it will require faith - faith that it can be moved, shovel of dirt at a time.

The text challenges us to take on a few mountains, and it also challenges us to regard our small life-tasks as doable. It is an invitation to tackle those life tasks which we know are God's work. It is not a promise that if you jack up your self confidence and say your prayers that you'll accomplish whatever you want. It is that if you trust God, God's work is going to get done in your life. It is a challenge to the insidious cynicism in ourselves about the future.

We need to hear the promise that we are created in God's image and given responsibility for creation and that no mountain is immovable. But the mountains which kept you awake last night - or which awakened you an hour before you wanted to be awake this morning, the mountains about which we do our real worrying are not public and political. They are huge, but they are personal. No one else knows about them. It is in personal, quiet moments that we confront them. Each of us has a mountain, visible only to us: looming ahead - immovable: someone is waging secret, life and death war with alcohol: a young man on drugs doesn't know where to turn or how to turn: a mother wonders about her meaning and identity when the last child moves out: an executive is passed over for promotion and looks ahead at a mountain of futility and a derailed career: a widow, left alone suddenly and without warning, wonders what there is of life left for her: the patient on chemotherapy, sick in body and in spirit, wonders if the mountain ahead is worth trying to move: a married couple senses deterioration and discord and the future looks like a steep, impassible mountain: a victim of AIDS faces the double tragedy of debilitating illness and social alienation. Somewhere you and I are in that picture - or a similar one. There is a mountain for each of us that seems immovable. And somewhere in each of us there is an impulse to let it stand there, to pull back to the safety of cynicism... "Oh what's the use...it's too big...too much..." And somewhere in us there is another, better impulse - the impulse of the couple to try again, to go once more to the counselor; the impulse of the patient to live, to undergo another series; the impulse of the widow to hang in, of the AIDS patient to take it a day at a time, and of the passed over executive to build again; the impulse of the

homemaker to find new meanings, of the chronically addicted to make it through one more day of burning need... I believe that impulse is put in us by the one who created us and loves us and wants us to be whole. I believe that impulse is what Jesus Christ addressed when he said "You don't need more faith, you need to use what you have. Venture. Try it. You could say to the mountain, 'Move from here to there and it will move' nothing will prove impossible for you."

What is this faith? It is not a list of ideas about the nature of God. It is an expectancy of the soul, a confidence that this God who created us is a resource for the living of full life. It is a thrust into the future which knows that the one who has been in our past will be in the days ahead, indeed is already in the future. It is a deep trust in Jesus to tell us the truth about God and ourselves. It is confidence not unlike that anonymous father's who brought his sick son and fell on his knees and said, "Lord have mercy."

He's the main character. It seems at first that he, and his sick son, are just part of the set, that Jesus' healing power and the disciples' weak faith are the real points of interest. But I keep coming back to him... He's the one who had faith like a mustard seed... He wasn't a disciple, a religious zealot, a Pharisee - just a human being, with a desperate problem - a deep love and an indomitable sense that his son must be well. He brought the immovable mountain in his life to Jesus - in simplicity - in total trust in the grace and acceptance and healing power of the one who is God among us.

He fell on his knees... "Lord have mercy..."

It just takes a little faith, Jesus promised, like a mustard seed. With it - you can move mountains. Amen.